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ABSTRACT

This newsletter issue focuses on the role of parents in monitoring their children's television viewing habits. The newsletter first discusses the current status of parental concerns about the content of television programming, noting the industry's increased willingness to provide more information, and the advent of a rating system and "v-chip" that would enable parents to block out objectionable television programs. It then discusses what research says about the effects of television viewing on children in the areas of amount of viewing, learning, violence, and use of time. This section notes that although children can learn a great deal from television, they learn less than they would from a comparable amount of time reading, and that excessive amounts of viewing inappropriate programs can desensitize children to violence. The newsletter then lists various organizations and their activities in the area of television and its effect on children, including the Federal Communications Commission, Children's Television Workshop, Center for Media Literacy, and various educational organizations such as the National PTA. Addresses of these organizations are then listed as sources for further information. The newsletter concludes with 10 suggestions for parents to curb the effects of television violence on their children. (HTH)

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TV Viewing and Parental Guidance

What is happening in this area? Parents, educators, and many others are concerned about the quality of programs—especially the amount of violence—children are seeing on television, and they have brought increasing pressure on the television industry to curb program content. Recent studies of the causes of violence in society provide added support for these concerns.[1] A compelling body of research shows that children watch a large amount of TV and that exposure to violent images is associated with anti-social and aggressive behavior.[2] In response to these concerns and the research evidence, the TV industry appears willing to provide more information to the public, through violence ratings and other warnings about programs, for example. They are also considering a technology to help parents monitor TV viewing. The technology known as a "v-chip" would enable parents to block out TV programs they do not want their children to watch. Other voluntary actions for reducing media violence, such as violence-free family viewing hours, are also being discussed.

Parental monitoring is a key factor, since the research studies show that increasing guidance from parents is at least as important as simply reducing media violence. Children may learn negative behavior patterns and values from many other experiences as well as TV programs, and parental guidance is needed to help children sort out these influences and develop the ability to make sound decisions on their own.

Even though having parents conduct their own review of program content is important, competing demands on parents' time often make this approach impractical. In many households, the children come home before their parents and are left without adult supervision for a part of the day or evening. In these and many other situations, families could benefit from a technology for the parents to block out offensive programs. The more flexible and effective the blocking mechanism for TV, the more useful it will be in accommodating individual family values and choice.

The national broadcast networks—CBS, ABC, NBC, and Fox—and the cable television networks have agreed to the development of systems for rating the violence in TV programs. Ratings would be developed by independent panels, not beholden to the networks.

As the rating systems and program-blocking technologies are developed, several problems need to be addressed. First, it is not yet settled whether all parties will agree to the same rating system, or whether different ratings will be used by the major network broadcasters and the cable networks. Second, the broadcast networks have not yet agreed upon a technology that would provide parents with a simple, one-step command to block all programs rated as violent en masse or on an individual basis. The cable networks, however, do support the use of the "v-chip" technology.

On a more detailed level, the television industry will need to come to grips with the question of what the ratings will measure—violence, nudity, and offensive language, possibly all combined in a single rating—and whether the ratings for individual programs will be made available within a reasonable amount of time prior to broadcasting. If so, the TV ratings might be similar to those used for movies. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) provides film ratings—G, PG, PG-13, R, and N-17—that appear in ads and movie reviews. The American Medical Association (AMA)

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and others have called for a system with more explicit warnings, especially with regard to violent content, which would be applied uniformly to movies, television, and other forms of video entertainment.

What does research say?

Amount of TV Viewing. The amount of television children watch varies immensely. Viewing habits range from the child who watches no TV at all to the child who is in front of the TV nearly all waking hours. On average, children aged 2 to 11 watch about 23 hours of TV per week, and teenagers watch about 22 hours per week. While these 1992 figures are down substantially—they were 28 hours per week and 23.5 hours per week, respectively, in 1986—the hours spent watching video cassettes and video games are not included. This means that during the formative years, children spend more time in front of a TV set than they do in classrooms.[3]

For about one-half of the viewing hours, children watch TV by themselves or with other children; the other half is spent co-viewing with one or more parents or other adults.[4] Roughly 90 percent of the time children watch programs that are not specifically designed for them.[5]

The decision to watch TV is influenced by several factors, including the lack of any preferred or required alternative activity; fondness for particular programs or characters; habit; and mood. The longer a child has spent watching TV at any one time, the more difficult he or she is to distract.[6]

Learning. Given a pattern of extensive TV viewing, it is important to understand how TV affects learning. Children, especially young children, can and do learn a lot from TV programs. Some programs combine entertainment and education to help children learn to identify characters and shapes, sequence numbers and letters, learn the vocabulary and sounds of songs and foreign languages, and more. As a consequence, today's children enter kindergarten with much larger vocabularies than pre-TV generations. And older children are able to recall sequential events and have developed enhanced skills in spatial relations from TV viewing.

However, children typically learn far less from TV than they do from a comparable amount of time spent reading. They also are likely to experience more difficulty with TV as compared to reading in identifying the major ideas of a story or themes of a feature topic. This may be because their level of intellectual involvement in TV programs is generally quite low or because they perceive TV as a relaxing activity rather than a thinking one.[7]

Violence and Use of Time. Unfortunately, not all of what children learn from TV is beneficial. TV programs often present a very selective view of life, with glamorous, witty, and powerful characters, which often stand in stark contrast to the real people children come into contact with. Children also learn at very young ages to laugh at violence. About 80 percent of all programs contain some violence with an overall average of slightly more than 5 violent acts per hour.[8] Settings and time patterns are often contrived and condensed into a time slot. Problems are often resolved quickly and violently, and the violent or other anti-social behavior often goes unpunished and without comment. And the "good-guys" are often not much better role models than the villains. As a consequence, many children are far more familiar with violent, anti-social approaches to problem-solving and conflict resolution than they are with nonviolent and pro-social ones. The problem is not just that children learn inappropriate behavior, but they also tend to adopt the evaluative standards that the programs project.[9]

Perhaps most worrisome is what goes unlearned because of the time lost to TV. TV displaces other activities. For example, most children need more time to play with others, to learn to build friendships, to resolve real-life disagreements, and to develop their own imaginations and abilities. One researcher put it this way: "Doing other things might teach children more about their world and foster development of talents, intellect, and physical abilities."[10]

Research shows that parents can protect their children from potentially harmful influences and can even use TV for learning and other age-appropriate developmental activities. Parents (and schools) can teach children critical viewing skills. For example, children can be taught to recognize stereotypes, distinguish fictional from factual portrayal, identify scenes portraying behavior and values that conflict with their own and their family's values, and think about and describe alternative, nonviolent means of resolving problems.[11]

What the research does not provide is much factual information on rating systems for TV programs, movies or other media. The information that is available is anecdotal and concerns primarily the MPAA movie ratings. While many parents find the MPAA movie ratings useful, many also say they often disagree with the ratings assigned. Others ask for more specific information on violence, nudity, and offensive language rather than just a composite classification.

Who's working in this area?

*The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is responsible for approval and renewal of operating licenses for broadcasters transmitting across public air waves. The FCC also enforces all laws pertaining to broadcasting.

*Children's Television Workshop has been developing TV programs for children and researching the impact of those programs on children for the last 20 years.

*The National Cable Television Association is pursuing an industry-wide anti-violence initiative through the development of standards aimed at reducing violence in cable programming, the development of a system for rating program content, and the support of viewer discretion technology.

*The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has produced a series of reports to parents offering practical advice on parenting. The NAESP report on TV violence emphasizes setting a good example, planning schedules for other activities as well as TV viewing, and working with the child to develop sound judgment and other interests.

*National PTA works with parents and teachers through its regional and local associations and has been actively involved in exploring media violence and other policy issues in the area of children's programming.

*The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), as the nation's largest association of early childhood professionals, develops resource and training books, videos, materials, and other services about child development and early education.

*The Center for Media Literacy has produced teaching resources and workshop kits to teach children, teens, and adults skills in understanding and evaluating the ways images, words, and sounds are used in all types of mass media.

Where can I get more information?

*Federal Communications Commission (FCC)
1919 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20554

*Children's Television Workshop
One Lincoln Plaza
New York, NY 10023

*The National Cable Television Association
1724 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036

*The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
1615 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

*National PTA
P.O. Box 88964
Chicago, IL 60603

*The National Association for the Education of Young Children
1509 16th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036

*The Center for Media Literacy
1962 South Shenandoah Street
Los Angeles, CA 90034

Notes:

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[11]Huesmann, L. R., Eron, L. D., Klein, R., Brice, P. & Fisher, P. (1983). Mitigating the Imitation of Aggressive Behaviors by Children's Attitudes About Media Violence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 44, pp. 899-910.

[12]The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP). (1993). *Report to Parents: How Parents Can Turn Off TV Violence.* Alexandria, VA: Author.

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How Parents Can Turn Off TV Violence

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has offered ten suggestions to parents:[12]

1. Set an example: Don't leave the TV on all the time, even when you're eating or engaged in other activities. Select specific programs for information or entertainment, and don't watch "adult" programs when children are present.
2. Don't use TV as a baby-sitter: Keep interesting items handy as an alternative to TV, such as jigsaw puzzles, board games, crayons, pencils, paper, books, and magazines.
3. Reject all other violent "media": Make it a family rule that violence has no place in your home, whether on videotapes, video games, radio programs, music lyrics, or reading materials.
4. Schedule daily activities: Teach your child to plan a daily after-school schedule in which TV fills only a small block of time—or perhaps none!
5. Plan a weekly TV schedule: Sit down each week with your child and choose suitable children's and family programs from the weekly TV listings.
6. Use TV to teach: Children interpret what they see differently than adults. They may not be able to distinguish fiction from fact, and something you think is funny may terrify a child. Therefore, it's a good idea to watch programs with your child and explain the difference between news and entertainment, reality and make-believe, education and exploitation. Discuss programs with your children and compare your family values with those shown on TV.
7. Keep an eye on the tube: Locate the family TV in a central location where you can monitor who is watching what. Children should not have TV sets in their bedrooms, although radios may be permitted and books are encouraged. Watch and evaluate new programs—even cartoons—before you let your child tune in.
8. Encourage other activities: The average American child watches TV for almost as much time as is spent in school! You can reduce TV time by requiring or promoting other at-home activities, such as exercise, hobbies, crafts, reading, playing games, tending pets, helping with household tasks, doing homework, keeping a journal, and writing letters.
9. Look for good TV: There are many fine programs on television that you can watch with your children including concerts, plays, sports events, nature and wildlife shows, animated films, and movies suitable for children.
10. Join forces to oppose TV violence: Cooperate with teachers and other parents in efforts to reduce TV violence by writing or calling local and network television officials, government regulatory agencies, and Congressional leaders. Let them know that you are concerned about TV violence and advocate the development of quality programs for children. You

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